

DAVID R. FOSTER

THOREAU'S COUNTRY

JOURNEY THROUGH A TRANSFORMED LANDSCAPE



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David R. Foster

Harvard University Press · Cambridge, Massachusetts · London, England

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Printed in the United States of America
Second printing, 2001

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 2001

Illustrations by Abigail Rorer

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Foster, David R., 1954–
Thoreau's country : journey through a transformed landscape /
David R. Foster.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-88645-3 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-00668-2 (pbk.)

1. Thoreau, Henry David, 1817–1862—Homes and haunts—New England.
2. Foster, David R., 1954– —Journeys—New England. 3. Authors,
American—19th century—Biography. 4. New England—Description and
travel. 5. Landscape changes—New England. 6. Natural history—New
England. I. Thoreau, Henry David, 1817–1862. II. Title.

PS3053.F66 1999

818'.309—dc21

[b] 98-39531

PREFACE



In the summer of 1977 I traveled from the place where I had grown up, in the rolling farmland of southern New England, to the woods of northern Vermont with a few tools and the ambition to build a cabin with my own hands and the natural resources that surrounded me. Knowing that I would be living for many weeks without visitors in a temporary shack located a few miles from the nearest road, I carried along a handful of books for company and inspiration. Included in this stack of reading were the journals of Henry David Thoreau. Over the next few months I would occasionally thumb through his writings while sitting on my shaded doorstep or on a rock soaking up sun along the pond shore, but I inevitably put them down with a sense of disillusionment, feeling that the passages were quite far removed from my daily experience in the woods. Thoreau's writings, even those from his own days of building a cabin at Walden Pond, did not mesh with the quiet and continuous forest that surrounded me or with my deep sense of solitude and loneliness.

One Sunday as I was catching a brief rest after a morning spent chopping wood, the faint tolling of a bell reached me, having wound its way up some four miles through the trees and hills from the village located in the valley below. This faint sound of civilization brought a recollection of Thoreau's journals and the regularity with which their passages described the sounds of church bells, locomotives shrieking across the far end of his pond, wagon wheels on the Lincoln road, and townspeople wandering through the woods of Walden. I was struck by the sudden recognition that the sights and sounds and nature that Thoreau encountered on his daily

walks through the nineteenth-century countryside of Massachusetts were not those of the deep forest that I was currently living in, but rather more like those I had experienced as a child in the agricultural hills of Connecticut. The area around my family's home was a landscape of corn fields, cow-filled pastures, and small woodlands, each separated by stone walls, and it was filled with the seasonally changing activities of farmers and their families. The smells of fresh-cut hay and recently spread manure, the sights of fencerow trees and neighbors toiling endlessly at their work, the activities of woodchucks, barn swallows, crows, and foxes, and the forays by children into the fields and swamps and orchards and streams were dominant features in this landscape. These memories resonated deeply with Thoreau's daily observations.

My reflections on Thoreau's writings and on these two landscapes in my life raised many questions about the history of New England and the observations of one of America's great nature writers. As my timber felling progressed through that autumn, and as the cut and peeled spruce logs accumulated on the hillside in northern Vermont where I was building my cabin, I had ample opportunity to pause and puzzle over the landscape of Thoreau, to wonder why the writings of a man known for his strong ethic of preservation and wilderness values seemed so foreign to me in the deep forest and yet so alive in a landscape of pastures and cows. In particular, I thought about the nature of Thoreau's woods, which he described as being very open and tame, filled with woodchoppers at their work, children gathering chestnuts or sassafras shoots, and early-rising farmers traveling to market. At the same time, I began to explore my own woods in Vermont and uncovered some surprises.

A wall of stones covered with ferns and moss climbed the forested hillside only a hundred yards from the site that I had chosen for my cabin. Adjacent was a vague, overgrown laneway that cut obliquely across the slope, filled in with a thick cover of striped maple and young spruce. On the other side of the pond, heaps of stones piled four or five feet across and a few feet high were scattered up the hillside, where the dense balsam fir and red spruce nearly obscured them with a thick layer of needles. Next to the stony bubbling spring where I collected water every morning was a deep depression filled with stone and brick and charcoal that marked an old cellar hole. The woods most certainly had a history that I had been quite unaware of, a history of people working and transforming the land, and creating a landscape very different from the one I now occupied. Despite the steep and rocky nature of the land, and the dark extent of the current forest that nearly obscured its history, this whole area had once

been inhabited, cleared of trees, and farmed. The more I searched on my daily walks, the more evidence I discovered of this past, in stone walls, wells, and cellar holes scattered through the woods, in bits of rusty barbed wire grown over deeply in a tree, and in the very shape of trees and the patterns they formed across the landscape. The low, spreading branches of a massive sugar maple, now engulfed by a continuous forest of straight and tall younger trees, indicated that in its past it had grown singly along a laneway and had offered shade to cows in an adjoining pasture. On close inspection, the dense hillside stand of red spruce and balsam fir reflected in the pond was strikingly rectangular in outline and evidently represented the first new generation of trees in a field that had been abandoned by some disillusioned farmer nearly a hundred years earlier.

Gradually I perceived the connection between the fields of Connecticut, the passages in Thoreau's journals, and the woods filled with ancient artifacts that now covered northern Vermont. Across New England and much of the eastern United States, the land had once been tamed and farmed through a relentless clearing of forests, piling of rocks, and toiling in fields and barns. Born in 1817, Thoreau had lived through the peak of this agrarian splendor, during a time when the population was spread quite evenly across the landscape in small farming villages and most people made a living by working products from the land. He built his cabin at Walden Pond in one of the few forest areas remaining in Concord, actually a woodlot that served for a century and a half as a source of fuel and timber and food for an active country population, and his journals resound with the sights and sounds and natural history of an open, vibrant, and quite domesticated landscape. Toward the end of Thoreau's life a second transformation of the countryside began, this time back to a wilder state, as New Englanders moved into the new farmlands of the Midwest or relocated into the emerging cities of the Industrial Revolution. As people left the land, pines and birches and blackberries crowded into the neglected pastures and forests sprang up in the old corn fields. Many of the homes, barns, schoolhouses, and wooden fences collapsed, leaving only their more durable remnants in woods that are now crisscrossed with trails descended from an abandoned network of rural roads. The fields that I grew up in, like those of the few other farm landscapes of modern New England, were the meager remains of a once vast countryside of pastures and hay fields and barns that extended from Long Island Sound through Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts to northern Vermont, New Hampshire, and southern Maine. Since Thoreau's day, most of the land has reverted to forest, like the one where I was retreating to build my cabin.

The changes in the natural world that I discovered through this reading of Thoreau and my reflection on the New England landscape led me to the realization that nature can only be understood through an awareness of its history. The red spruce that now form the snug walls of my log cabin grew on that Vermont hillside as a consequence of nineteenth-century farming activity and the subsequent decision by a Yankee farmer to quit the area nearly a century ago. The trees that have replaced the spruce as I cut them down are of completely different species, mostly sugar maple, beech, and yellow birch, because this time around nature is filling small openings in the woods, not overtaking large abandoned fields. Meanwhile, the deer that were once so common on my first childhood trips to northern Vermont have mostly disappeared, replaced by a rapidly expanding moose population that thrives in the old, deep forests and wetlands that increasingly characterize New England.

The threads of this and other stories of change extend across New England, the eastern United States, and much of the globe. For the remarkably dynamic history of New England is certainly not a unique story. From the boreal forests of Alaska, where natural forest fires create an endlessly changing mosaic on the land, to the tropical landscape of the Yucatan Peninsula, where the enigmatic decline of a thriving Mayan population a thousand years ago allowed forests to engulf the temple-remnants of a great civilization, the natural world is characterized by change. Understanding this change and interpreting the history of nature are crucial if we are to appreciate, conserve, and manage these natural ecosystems.

After I left my cabin in the woods, as I traveled and studied, I continued to read Thoreau's journals and to walk his landscape on each trip back to New England. Eventually, I was able to return for good to study the land, its ecology, and its history and to use the landscape as a textbook for teaching ecological principles and the complex story of the interactions of humans and nature. In this work I have found Thoreau's daily writings in his journal to be an invaluable source of insight and inspiration. In contrast to *Walden*, which Thoreau edited so rigorously that it is surprisingly free of natural history observations, the journals are full of anecdotes and extended descriptions of the land, its fields and forests, and its people. They are also filled with Thoreau's musings on the importance of nature's history, notes from his own research on changes in his landscape, and reflections on how these changes affected everything he saw.

My aim in writing this book has been to illustrate how dramatically nature can change in a very short period of time and how essential it is to recognize this potential for change in order to appreciate and understand

natural landscapes. As he set out to interpret his own landscape, Thoreau used many clues, such as the history of a tree captured in its growth rings, the age of a stone wall determined by the size of lichens growing on it, or the evidence contained in old maps, deeds, and histories, and thus a second objective of this book was to use Thoreau's writings to highlight some of the many approaches one can take to uncover nature's history. Finally, I have used Thoreau's descriptions of the sights and character of New England at its peak of agricultural activity in order to interpret the landscape history that has shaped our modern countryside.

Although Thoreau's descriptions center on Concord, Massachusetts, I did not set out to tell the story of a single township or landscape, nor to assess the scientific abilities or literary development of a single individual. Rather, I am seeking to outline a much broader story about the dynamics of landscapes and the importance of recognizing nature's own history when interpreting and conserving it. Thoreau's writings shed light on the importance and application of this historical approach, and thus a substantial part of each chapter consists of Thoreau's own words—excerpts from the journals that convey his appreciation for landscape change and provide insights into the processes that shaped his landscape and have led to the development of ours. My own observations are intended as a companion to Thoreau's, to provide a context for his descriptions and in some cases to explain them more fully. I also discuss the ways in which Thoreau's observations may be applied to the understanding and conservation of modern landscapes.

This volume owes its development and inspiration to many people. I thank Anne and Pete Foster for a rural upbringing in a Connecticut landscape that retained a surprising resemblance to Thoreau's in appearance and activity and for encouraging me to experience the northern, wilder part of New England as well. My understanding of New England land-use activity began on the Bartholomew, Cella, and Anderson farms, where I worked and learned, among other things, to pick stones from plowed fields and then to spread the manure; I also benefited from the friendship of Bill Tresselt, who introduced me to squirrel hunts, bass fishing, muskrat traps, and more, and that of Jim Gaffey and then Fred Keogh, who joined me for many exploits. From Bill Niering, Dick Goodwin, and Betty Thomson I learned to interpret quite a bit of landscape history, and with Herb Wright and Bud Heinselman I began to put this ability into practice. Much of my understanding of the ecology and history of the New England countryside developed at the Harvard Forest,

through discussions with Ernie Gould, Hugh Raup, Glenn Motzkin, and John O'Keefe, and from many walks with classes and colleagues. Gordon Whitney and George Peterken inspired me to put this ecological understanding in a rigorously historical context; Barbara Flye has made the development of this book an ongoing and delightful collaboration; and Dorothy Smith has helped to put all of my work in final form.

The research behind this project has been underwritten by the A. W. Mellon Foundation and the National Science Foundation, which have been extremely supportive of studies of landscape change. The completion of this manuscript has benefited greatly from the comments, suggestions, and encouragement of Marianne Jorgensen, Pete and Anne Foster, Jim Gaffey, Glenn Motzkin, John O'Keefe, Barry Tomlinson, Larry Buell, Kay Gross, Harry Foster, Birgit Jorgensen, John Burk, Kate Scott, and Ray Angelo. Abbie Rorer's shared interest in and familiarity with the history of the New England countryside have made working with her on the illustrations a great pleasure. At Harvard University Press the support and advice of Ann Downer-Hazell, Mary Ellen Geer, and Michael Fisher have greatly improved this book. Most important, my first question concerning the name and biology of a tree (it was a very shade-tolerant beech) was answered by Marianne Jorgensen in 1970. She has inspired me to follow this question with countless others and has joined with me and Christian and Ava in many wonderful pursuits. For this I will be forever grateful.

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PROLOGUE:

ONE MAN'S JOURNAL



“What are you doing now?” he asked. “Do you keep a journal?” So I make my first entry today.

OCTOBER 22, 1837

In the Morgan Library in New York City there are thirty-nine simple journeyman's books, of varying size and shape, neatly bound and strapped in a pine case handcrafted by the author himself. Written in a flowing though nearly illegible hand, they contain the thoughts and observations of a man who spent all but a few of his years roaming the nineteenth-century countryside of Concord, Massachusetts. Although he traveled, he was a man who recognized that a universe existed within himself and the borders of his own landscape—a universe of field and forest; of meadow and stream; of birds and mammals and domesticated livestock; of people living and dead, whose activities and toil he admired, and whose influence on his countryside intrigued him.

The writer was Henry David Thoreau. By the time that tuberculosis stilled his thoughts and pen in 1862, the journals had grown to more than two million words, a remarkable legacy of writing and observation. By this time, as well, the New England landscape had been transformed from the wilderness of Indians, old-growth forest, and bountiful wildlife that greeted the early colonists to an agricultural countryside of farmers, meadows, woodlots, and meadowlarks. Since Thoreau's death this landscape has been transformed yet again: the farmers have left their lands, trees and woodland plants have taken over the fields, and a forest filled with wildlife

has appeared once more. Thoreau's journals therefore provide more than the literary and philosophical gems for which they are commonly admired and mined. These daily observations are a priceless source of information about the changing relationship between people and the natural environment that has shaped the land and continues to determine where it is heading.

As the quotation at the beginning of this chapter reveals, Thoreau began his habit of regular journal entries in 1837, when he was twenty, after Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested that he use a journal to develop his skills of writing and observation. Writing nearly daily and composing frequent lengthy passages, he maintained this routine until his death. The journals, along with his separate volumes of quotes and lessons from books that he read, represent literally his life's work, for Thoreau considered himself to be fully employed with his responsibilities of experiencing nature, recording his thoughts and details of natural history, and then combining the resulting observations and reflections into the daily journal entries. Only a small subset of these notations were subsequently extracted and carefully edited by Thoreau to form the two volumes that appeared during his lifetime, *Walden* and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

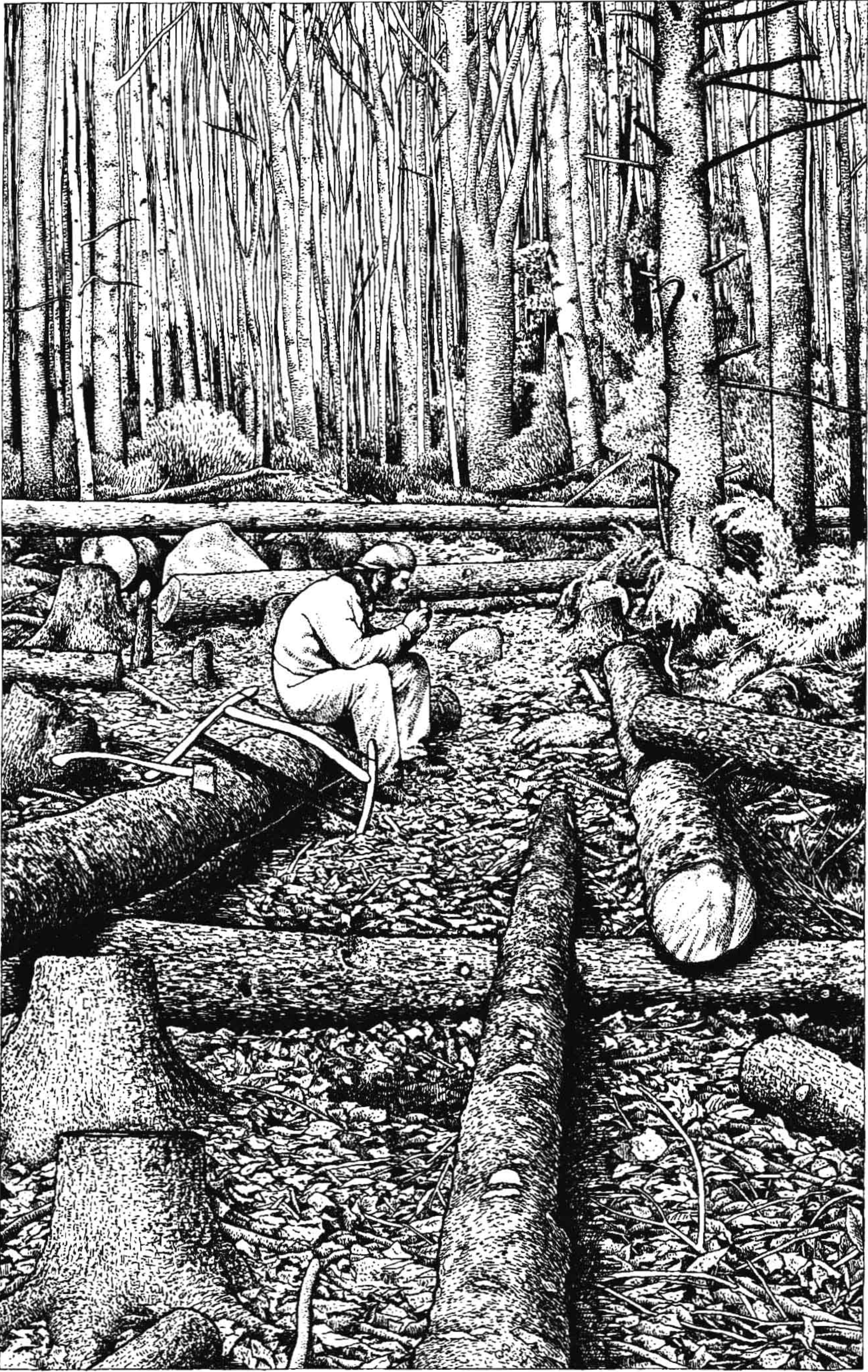
Thoreau's insights into the New England landscape and natural history are the product of his single-minded devotion to the daily observation and interpretation of the countryside that surrounded him and his commitment to understanding the history of changing forces that shaped everything he saw. His journal is a rich source of information precisely because he lived in and described one relatively small part of New England in the context of its changing history. Rather than choosing to explore the world and document nature and human activity extensively, Thoreau sought to reflect intensively on the daily, seasonal, and annual happenings of the New England countryside. The result is an unparalleled wealth of observations and reflections that were based on repeated visits to the same sites, under changing conditions, separated by time and the opportunity for careful thought. Thus he was able to document the commonplace as well as interpret the complex.

Thoreau pursued this approach of intimate observation and careful reflection because he was convinced that all he needed to learn of importance was inside himself and that much of this could be brought out and illuminated through observations of his surroundings. This belief persuaded him to stay home to explore himself and nature. Through this process he found remarkable local analogues to a wide range of human experience and emotion. In order to witness the emotion and struggle of

a war, he turned his gaze from Homeric epics to the red and black ants that engaged in anxious, single-minded battle in his cabin dooryard at Walden. To enjoy wild landscapes, he secluded himself in Gowing's swamp, where he became convinced that wildness is more an attribute of man than of nature. To observe human virtue or vice, or to record examples of the power and beauty of nature, he searched the fields, hills, and farmyards of Concord, where he found each in abundance. He seldom felt the urge to travel—after all, he stated, when one travels to a new place, one arrives only to discover oneself.

The conviction that true knowledge and experience come from exploring oneself in the natural world that surrounds us led Thoreau to a comprehensive documentation of the fully humanized landscape of New England. By devoting himself to this activity, he became an observer of people, their impact on the natural world, and the plants, animals, and landscapes that they shaped. Thus, while he often walked across lots to avoid a land owner, he just as frequently found himself observing and admiring the farmers and cattle that he encountered in the pastures. As he traveled the woods to revel in the company of the few remaining grand trees, he found himself absorbed in the tales of woodland history recounted by Alek Therien, a resident woodchopper. As he floated on streams looking at musquash (muskrat), he often ended up following the trapping activities of John Goodwin, the one-eyed fisherman, or sampling the fumes of blackstrap liquor in a jug abandoned by the men who mowed the meadows. Paradoxically, one of America's great nature writers also had a keen interest in people, and he probed deeply into the complex interactions between humans and their environment.

Few days in Thoreau's life passed without some note-taking or a journal entry, and many entries consisted of lengthy passages describing the activity and stories of his countryside acquaintances, or recounting an excursion by foot or boat. Others combined thoughts, observations, and recent readings into a philosophical or historical discussion on the state of man and society. Thoreau's journal entries convey a sense of immediacy that suggests spontaneous invention; however, it is clear that they were crafted with care and great deliberation. Individual entries were based on his jottings in the field and were rewritten from these preliminary drafts. Many events and thoughts appear in different entries on successive days. Writings from one day may be cross-referenced, corrected, or expanded in later entries. Library readings and scientific discussions with experts in botany, zoology, and geology in Cambridge and Boston are quoted and referenced, sometimes extensively. And many passages from *Walden* and *A Week on the*



Concord and Merrimack Rivers appear in earlier form throughout the journals. For Thoreau, writing was a joy as well as an exercise in developing the skills of observation and communication, and it filled his daily life and lifetime.

What need to travel? There are no sierras equal to the clouds in the sunset sky.

JANUARY 11, 1852

It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brain and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess in Concord, *i.e.* than I import into it.

AUGUST 30, 1856

I have given myself up to nature; I have lived so many springs and summers and autumns and winters as if I had nothing else to do but *live* them, and imbibe whatever nutriment they had for me; I have spent a couple of years, for instance, with the flowers chiefly, having none other so binding engagement as to observe when they opened; I could have afforded to spend a whole fall observing the changing tints of the foliage.

SEPTEMBER 19, 1854

If these fields and streams and woods, the phenomena of nature here, and the simple occupations of the inhabitants should cease to interest and inspire me, no culture or wealth would atone for the loss.

MARCH 11, 1856

The question is not where did the traveller go? what places did he see?—it would be difficult to choose between places—but who was the traveller? how did he travel? how genuine an experience did he get?

JANUARY 11, 1852

A man must generally get away some hundreds or thousands of miles from home before he can be said to begin his travels. Why not begin his travels at home? Would he have to go far or look very closely to discover novelties? The traveller who, in this sense, pursues his travels

at home, has the advantage at any rate of a long residence in the country to make his observations correct and profitable. Now the American goes to England, while the Englishman comes to America, in order to describe the country. No doubt there [are] some advantages in this kind of mutual criticism. But might there not be invented a better way of coming at the truth than this scratch-my-back-and-I'll-scratch-yours method? Would not the American, for instance, who had himself, perchance, travelled in England and elsewhere make the most profitable and accurate traveller in his own country? How often it happens that the traveller's principal distinction is that he is one who knows less about a country than a native! Now if he should begin with all the knowledge of a native, and add thereto the knowledge of a traveller, both natives and foreigners would be obliged to read his book; and the world would be absolutely benefited.

AUGUST 6, 1851

Flag Hill is about eight miles *by the road* from Concord. We went much further, going and returning both; but by how much nobler road! Suppose you were to ride to Boxboro, what then? You pass a few teams with their dust, drive through many farmers' barn-yards, between two walls, see where Squire Tuttle lives and barrels his apples, bait your horse at White's Tavern, and so return, with your hands smelling of greasy leather and horsehair and the squeak of a chaise body in your ears, with no new flower nor agreeable experience.

JUNE 19, 1852

Many a man, when I tell him that I have been on to a mountain, asks if I took a glass with me. No doubt, I could have seen further with a glass, and particular objects more distinctly,—could have counted more meeting-houses; but this has nothing to do with the peculiar beauty and grandeur of the view which an elevated position affords. It was not to see a few particular objects, as if they were near at hand, as I had been accustomed to see them, that I ascended the mountain, but to see an infinite variety far and near in their relation to each other, thus reduced to a single picture.

OCTOBER 20, 1852